

*Our Lady of Grace*

HISTORY OF O.L.G. CHURCH AND SCHOOL

Highland- History

Churches

**HIGHLAND**

Ladies and gentlemen, members of the Historical Society -- Immediately following my talk, I will give a slide presentation showing some physical aspects of the church and current trends in the school.

In the years immediately before 1950, the whole nation was experiencing a post-war expansion. The Calumet Region was no exception, and soon the Catholics in Highland were to be numerous enough to need a church of their own. For this purpose, in June, 1947, the Diocese sent the Rev. Lee Hildebrandt and Mr. C. W. Melton on a trip to Cleveland, Ohio to complete the purchase of land in Highland for a future parish on Highway and Fifth. But much had to be done before the land could be productive.

No church could build itself without a parish family and a dynamic leader willing to embark on this adventure. The Bishop of Fort Wayne, the most Rev. John Nell found that leader and appointed Father Alvin Jascinski. The interested parishioners and their new leader met for the first time at St. Mary in Griffith on September 15, 1949. A name was needed for the new parish. After much thought and many suggestions, the final choice became Our Lady of Grace. This name was approved by the Bishop on October 7th and the new parish was on its way! The embryo parish of about 212 families celebrated Christmas Mass at the Town Theatre on Kennedy Avenue December 25, 1949.

Naturally, a more permanent place was needed to celebrate any services. The church owned the land on Highway and Fifth but at that time, Bishop Nell advised against the idea of any new construction. In September of 1950, plans were formed and completed to acquire the Calvary Baptist Church property on Jewett Street. This building was the first church building in Highland and was dedicated The People's Church in 1900. Armed with paint brushes and hammers, enthusiastic and hard working parishioners converted the Jewett Street Building into Highland's first Catholic Church.

A total of 272 people attended a Catholic Mass in Highland for the First time on October 29, 1950.

With a church capacity of only 98, in one short year the building's seams were bulging and more room was needed. On June 16, 1951, once more parishioners banded together and put an addition on the church. The new addition was dedicated by Bishop Lee Fursley on October 28, 1951. The Church capacity had risen from 98 to 298 people. The religious ceremonies held for the first time in adequate surroundings enhanced the spiritual highlights and events.

Father Jacinski and the ever-increasing enrollment of new families soon found the addition was not enough for the rapidly growing group of Catholics. Together they dreamed of a new larger church in which to worship and a school to give the Word of God to their children. In July 1953, a door-to-door campaign called Foundation Fund Drive was held and about \$264,00 was pledged over a five-year period. The new church and school were now in view!

That same month, on July 8, 1953, Father Charles Frobish was assigned to the parish as the first assistant pastor to aid Father Jacinski with the new 540 families in the new parish.

Although the town of Highland had a population of only 9,011 -- 1954 was indeed a notable year for the Our Lady of Grace Parish. On February 6, ground was broken for the new one-story church and 10 classroom school with full basement at the Highway Avenue property purchased in 1947.



Negotiations between the Sisters of St. Francis based in Mishawaka, Indiana and Father Jacinski were completed and the nuns agreed to come to teach at the soon-to-be-completed school. The parish purchased a house located at 2930 Franklin Street for their convent.

A few months later, July 11, construction on the church-school began with Monsignor Edward Mungovan, pastor of All Saints in Hammond, blessing the cornerstone of the new structure. Construction continued throughout the summer but when September rolled around the building was not finished.

However, 291 students, 3 lay teachers and three nuns were ready to start the school year. So, headed by the undaunted principal Sister Mary Frieda, all but the seventh and eight grade pupils, who had classes at St. Mary in Griffith, attended 8:00 mass every morning in the church. Then, thanks to the generosity of our community neighbors, the students treked through all kinds of weather to the American Legion Post on Ridge Road and the nearby Presbyterian Church Hall for classes.

At best, conditions were difficult. Books were stored in boxes at the students' feet while teachers taught from card tables. On December 1, 1954, the doors of the school swung open for grades 1 through 6 classrooms which were now completed at the one-story limestone on Highway Avenue.

The remaining classrooms, along with the new basement church were finished in the beginning of 1955. Mass was offered for the first time in the new church on April 22, 1955 and dedicated by Bishop Pursley in September of the same year. During 1955, the school enrollment grew to 450 and the parish grew to 2500 members (728 families). Expansion became an ever-present factor at Our Lady of Grace.

With school enrollment over 700 in 1956 a much-needed second story was constructed and dedicated by Bishop Andrew Grudka on October 27th. Included were classrooms, convent, and library. Father Jacinski received a new assistant, Father Deugherty, in 1956 and in 1957, a replacement named Father Wise. Unfortunately, as parish and school grew, purse strings tightened accordingly. To reduce the over half-million dollar debt, the parishioners launched the Debt Reduction Drive in July of 1958 and went door-to-door for a second time seeking pledges. With the added work load for the priests, we were given a second assistant, Father Nendorf.

In 1959, a new addition was put onto the rectory. We also had two new assistants, Father Minnich and Father Belan.

Over 1,000 students filled the halls of the school in 1960 and October of that year brought with it the tenth anniversary of Our Lady of Grace. The parishioners now over 5000 strong celebrated with a special Mass of Thanksgiving and commemorated the event with a program at St. Thomas More's gymnasium.

By 1962, the parish had grown by leaps and bounds. Sister Mary Mathilde became principal over 1,011 students. Due to lack of space, first grade classes had to be discontinued. That Our Lady of Grace needed a new church was evident, because on Sundays, masses were said simultaneously in two sections of the school basement, the church, and cafeteria, and at both 10:00 and 11:15 A.M. The two assistants who came in 1962, Father Till and Father Lazar, were certainly kept busy.

Our Lady of Grace parish was on her way to becoming one big melting pot of nationalities. We are fortunate, even today, to have many ethnic backgrounds represented by our parish. The people, who have shared their customs and traditions, have enriched and will continue to enrich the lives of all of us.



In April of 1963, a major change came about in the parish family, Father Alvin Jacinski was transferred to St. Mark's in Gary Indiana, while Father Albert Van Nevel of Notre Dame of Michican City became the new pastor of the ever-growing parish in Highland, now numbering 1,500 families.

Immediately, the parishioners took to this energetic and dynamic leader who introduced himself in his first sermon as Father Van Nevel not "Father Van Devil". Even today, his long stride and a black flowing cape let us know - who's coming! With a cheerful "top of the morning" he greets everyone and keeps working on his many projects as he did in the past to make sure "the price is right"!

Parish members along with their new pastor realized the need to expand but plans could not be made until the still considerable church debt could be eliminated. Father Van Nevel brought a great spirit, ideas and methods, and a new project: an endeavor that was so successful that many people in Highland will remember it for years to come. The project introduced by Father Van became known as the Family Festivals. Many weeks of preparation involved the whole cooperation from all parishioners of Our Lady of Grace before the gala events. Game Booths, Homemade Goodies, and Phenominal Crowds made the weekend enjoyable and the festivals always ended with a chicken dinner. During 1963, 64, and 65, the festivals served their purpose amazingly well socially and financially. In that three year period, the church members plucked 7,500 chickens, and shocked 10,000 ears of corn, while earning about \$136,000.

With this impetus and increased giving the parish debt was soon eliminated and the new church loomed as a reality. Helping Father Van as assistants during this time span were Father Hendricks, Father Lawrence, Father Fabian, and Father Zajdel.

The year 1966 saw the parish grow to 2,000 families and on September 3, land was finally broken for the new church.

As 1967 drew to a close, the new church was dedicated on December 10 by Bishop Grutka. The proud pastor, together with his parishioners celebrated a joyful mass. A record, recording the events of the day, was made available to the parish and served as a lasting memorial of the day. Assistants with us from 1967 to 69 were Father Savio and Father Spranger.

The air-conditioned church is the largest new church in the Gary Diocese and with its informal contemporary style is designed to offer attractive and natural surroundings in which to worship.

A physical description of the building shows it to be 223-ft. long, 148-ft. wide, and 50-ft. to the highest point with an area of 22,00 sq. ft. The flooring consists of terrazzo and quarry tile while face brick, stone and wood combine to provide the natural effect of the building.

The main area provides seating for approximately 1,400 people while the Tiny Tots Chapel serves families with small children and seats 65 people. Used for smaller services and some daily masses, The Blessed Sacrament Chapel offers a serene setting for individual prayer and will accommodate 100 people.

The altars, baptismal font, and holy water fountains are cut from Roman Travertine marble and the wooden hand-carved statues are made of Linden Wood from Italy. The stained glass windows are of the finest mouth-blown French, German, and English antique glasses with an unusually wide range of lead comes employed in securing them.



The south window depicts the Archangel Gabriel announcing to Mary she is chosen as the mother of Jesus. The north window in the sanctuary with its thrusting spires glorifies the focal point of our religious services -- the main altar. The red exterior windows of the Blessed Sacrament Chapel and its white interior ones represent the blood and water shed by Christ. The remaining windows in an Ashlar pattern and a variety of colors are keyed to existing light conditions in the church and all carry the same linear grid in order to serve as a continuous girdle around the exterior walls of the structure.

Standing outside in front of the church and school complex is the bell tower topped by an aluminum cross. The top of the cross is 85-ft. above the ground and the bell tower is 60-ft. high. The bell itself is cast bronze metal made in Holland and has an electric clapper. It is  $40\frac{1}{2}$  inches in diameter, 34 inches high, weighs 1,650 lbs. and has pitch tone G.

This beautiful church began to serve a parish body of 8,303 members (1,971 families). The now empty basement was renovated and changed into new classrooms and a larger library. The assistants to Father Van Nevel were Father Vames and Father Friako, while the present principal, Sister Clarice, came in 1969.

Father Amaling and Father Kew who were followed by Father Wehner, lent us a hand as assistants in the seventies while some physical changes taking place were basketball courts placed on the parking lot, and physical education added to the school curriculum, and an expanded library.

Throughout the summer of 1974, two major projects were in a race against time. A flurry of hammering, sawing, and painting took place once more by the men of the parish and in September, the new sister's home on the northeast corner of Cendit and Fifth was completed -- a decided asset to the Community. During these same three months -- on the second floor of the school -- they renovated the sister's former convent into classrooms, with the addition of these new classrooms, the first grade was again resumed after an absence of thirteen years.

Just a personal aside here -- This was the year my family and I moved to Highland and our daughter became one of these of those new first graders. -- Yesterday, we celebrated her thirteenth birthday and she is now in the seventh grade at O.L.G. Who says time doesn't fly!

Sent to assist us in October of 1974 were Father Orlinski and Father Messur.

In 1975, the school received its first class distinction -- and has continued to keep this highest rating a grade school can receive. The most important highlight of 1975 was in October when the parish celebrated its twenty-fifth, silver anniversary with a mass of thanksgiving and an elegant pageant portraying past years. The celebration concluded with a catered dinner at the new Wicker Park Social Center.

Because of the unsound structure and a danger of collapse, on March 2, 1976, the old church building was razed and the parish welcomed Father Niblick as the new assistant.

Construction was begun on a new rectory and living quarters for our pastor and his two assistants on May 22, 1980, after the removal of a house on the property located at 3001 Cendit Avenue.



The remaining property on Jewett Street houses an office complex for our priests and a meeting room for the various social and parish service organizations that play a vital financial and spiritual part in the parish structure. The parish now serves over 3,000 families.

Most of this discussion relates the construction of buildings and the additions and refinements that were accomplished when necessary. We should not, however, neglect the primary meaning behind the whole system -- learning to know, serve and love God. Accordingly, Our Lady of Grace also provides religious instruction for these students attending the Public schools. The C.C.D. Program, staffed by volunteers, conducts weekly classes during the school year. Over the years, a spiritual heritage has evolved for Our Lady Of Grace. We have four "daughters" of the parish who have dedicated their lives as nuns and three parish "sons" following the eminent calling of the priesthood.

These physical and spiritual accomplishments are the results of the vision, toil, and stick-to-it-tive-ness of our leaders and loyal parishioners.

We also owe an immeasurable debt of gratitude to the original members of our parish. These pioneers, with Monsignor Jacinski, had the ambition and foresight to bring the parish family together. The foundation that was set in the early 50's grew out of the dreams and needs of these fine people. Their elbow-grease and fund drives were the spark that ignited our parish. This, for the generations that follow, will be just a fading memory, but we must always be grateful.

This speech was given on May 21, 1980 to the Historical Society of Highland. A tape was made and is stored with the Highland Library as a reference source. The speech was followed by a slide presentation.

Paula Engelbert



## SLIDE PRESENTATION

- 1 This is Father Van Nevel, our pastor since 1963. He not only offers us a spiritual foundation but also invigorates any activity the parish undertakes.
- 2 Father Rick came to us in 1974 and besides ably assisting Father Van, conducts religion classes weekly in the first and second grades at the school. Father is also the Coordinator of the High School CCD classes.
- 3 Father Mark joined the parish family as assistant in September of 1980. He sponsors the youth of the parish and conducts religion classes in grades 3 through 8 every three weeks.
- 4 The services at the church center around the focal point in the sanctuary -- the altar. Masses are offered daily for spiritual growth and worship.
- 5 This slide shows the north window symbolizing "a glory".
- 6 This altar or table is constructed of Roman Travertine marble and symbolizes both sacrificial worship and our participation in the Eucharist.
- 7 The pews in the main area as you remember seat 1,400 people and are fabricated from laminated red oak.
- 8 The statues of Mary and Joseph which adorn the east and west walls are of Linden Wood. They were handcarved in Oberammergau, Germany by artists Hans and Adelp Heinzeller.
- 9 We are very proud of the bell tower constructed of Cor-Ten Steel with an aluminum cross. You can hear its inspirational melodies daily.
- 10 This is Sister Clarice, the principal of the School since 1969. She is a truly dedicated and enthusiastic leader.
- 11 Today, Our Lady of Grace prides itself on having one of the best and most productive schools in the region.
- 12 There are twenty-four classrooms -- three of each grade one through eight, a faculty lounge, an audio visual resource center, a new public address system and newly remodeled kitchen in the basement.
- 13 There are 27 full-time teachers -- 2 music teachers -- a physical education instructor who takes each class once a week -- school secretary -- school nurse -- playground coordinator and a staff of 3 for janitorial services. All these people meet the needs of the 750 school enrollment.
- 14 The Home and School Association brings parents and teachers together for educational and informational programs. It meets 5 times a year and helps the school financially with many fund raising activities. It is also a good source for voluntary mother-helper aides.
- 15 The school library has two full-time librarians and is staffed with  
16 volunteer help.  
17 It has over 2,600 filmstrips and about 10,000 circulating books.  
There are about 700 slides and over 500 records and cassettes in the listening center and reference, study room.
- 18-19 There are three Title IV reading aides and a speech therapist available to students



- 20 Extra-curricular activities also play a big part in the grade school curricula. Mr. Greenock has been the band director for the past eight and the cadet, junior, and senior bands have students ranging from the 4th to the 8th grades. Combined with St. Mary, Griffith, the band has participated in many parades and special events.
- 21 Eight grade students now enjoy special weekly mini-courses designed to  
22 help them expand in interest areas and skills. A Few of these are  
23 drafting  
24 teacher aide  
ceramics  
and clothing.
- 25 A large percentage of the students are interested in athletics.  
The sports program started in 1955. Boys in grades 6 , 7 , and 8  
play basketball.
- 26 New girls in grades 6 , 7 , and 8 play vollyball and basketball.
- 27 The Our Lady of Grace Knights are part of the South Suburban League.
- 28 The School also encourages journalistic talents by issuing both a  
monthly grade school newspaper called Pee Wee Newspaper and also a  
monthly Junior High edition of the Journal. O.L.G. also sponsors the  
annual Science Fair and the Art Fair.
- 29 In the future the school will continue to be a growing concern with  
one thing in mind -- producing God-fearing, enlightened young men and  
women.
- 30 While the church continues striving to serve the needs of the community --  
be it parish -- town -- state -- or world and to worship our Creator  
according to established Catholic Tradition and tenets.